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REVIEW ARTICLE

Blackface, passing or coming home

LISA KINGSTONE

Rachel Doležal with Storms Reback, *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World*. Dallas: BenBella Books 2017. xvi+281pp. \$17.47. ISBN 978-1-944-64816-9.

Certain moments in history have tripped the landmine that is the racial trauma in the United States: the O. J. Simpson trial, the beating of Rodney King and, recently, the response to Rachel Doležal, the ‘black’ NAACP president who was infamously outed as white during a television interview in June 2015. After a very public flogging that went on for months, the publication of *In Full Colour* in March 2017 set off a second round. Along with the ridicule, people have called Doležal the worst expletives English can afford, suggested she should be lynched and die; and diagnosed her as psychotic for thinking she could be black. Karen Fields and Barbara Jeanne Fields argue in their book *Racecraft* that our belief in Race operates as a kind of hysteria, much like the concept of Witch during the Salem witch trials.¹ This was at play in the media storm around Doležal, who claimed unabashedly to be able to choose her race. That assertion poked the country’s racial wound. What Doležal represents to people depends on their race but, for everyone, she is a meaningful symbol, and her choice to step over the colour line has ignited fury. Doležal, however, is also a woman on a personal and radical journey, doing something that hasn’t been attempted before. Her recent book *In Full Color: Finding My Place in a Black and White World* separates out the person from the potent symbol she’s become.

Reading her story shows the possibility of seeing black as a culture and a choice rather than a race. Doležal provides the emotional context for her identity shift, something she couldn’t do during her year-long media trial and its aftermath. At that time, most interviewers were more interested in the sensationalism *around* her than hearing *from* her. The book lays bare how her choices were not made lightly, and that there was never anything temporary about her decisions. The story makes the reader probe the key questions that she asks in her prologue, questions that have plagued the country since its

¹ Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London and New York: Verso 2012).

importing of African slaves: 'If scrutinising people's appearance can't provide definitive proof of their racial identity, what does? How do you decide whether certain people are white or black?' (4).

Beyond Category

Doležal's book is hard to categorize much like the author herself. It is at once a spiritual memoir, a captivity narrative and a coming-of-age story. Because Doležal was raised in a fundamentalist Christian sect, she has real familiarity with the Bible and its themes. Her chapters have titles such as 'Delivered by Jesus', 'Emancipation' and 'Rebirth'; and the movement from misery to joy follows the arc of spiritual awakening memoirs, from lost to found. However, unlike spiritual memoirs that end in a kind of peace, Doležal was ousted from the community she had joined soon after she found her place in it.

This narrative thread has much in common generically with a captivity narrative. Her childhood—which is described the same way by her older brother Joshua in his memoir²—was a kind of indentured servitude on the isolated plains of Montana where she lived with her family at a subsistence level and was home schooled according to a strict Christian fundamentalist programme. She was hit with a switch for any disobedience, and was worked from early morning to night. When she finally left home for college and became her true self, she experienced an exhilarating feeling of escape to freedom.

Finally, and most importantly, however, the book is a coming-of-age story. Figuring out who she was in terms of race, and finding meaning and community are the main themes of Doležal's narrative. It shows how she struggled but failed to find a place in the community and colour into which she was born. She doesn't claim anything beyond what she feels is her right: to choose the identity that fits her. When looked at from Doležal's perspective—when, from a young age, all that she felt was meaningful to her life and identity was related to blackness—it is hard to find anything strange in her ticking the Black box on the Census form.³

Many have interpreted her as a 'passer' and will read her story as a passing narrative. But *In Full Colour* does not actually have much in common with racial passing narratives like Griffins's *Black Like Me* (1960) or Johnson's *Diary of an Ex Coloured Man* (1912) since, although both of those works, the first non-fiction, the second fiction, told of a man's sojourn into another race, both of

² Joshua Doležal, *Down from the Mountaintop: From Belief to Belonging* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2014).

³ In a footnote on her first page, Doležal makes it clear that she is not African American, but black: 'I believe "Black" should always be capitalized when referring to culture or ethnicity. To my mind "black" describes a color, while "Black," like "Asian" or "Hispanic," denotes a group of people. I don't capitalize "white" because white Americans don't comprise a single ethnic group and rarely describe themselves this way, preferring labels like "Italian American" or "Scotch Irish".'

them felt they were interlopers and longed for return.⁴ Doležal, on the other hand, felt no remorse when she was outed and had no wish to come back to whiteness no matter how difficult others were making her life. She does not think of herself as a ‘passer’, but simply someone accessing her true identity. Today, two years later, she continues to resist the boundaries we all have come to depend on between black and white, and she still identifies herself as black.

The strongest section of the book is the first. This part covers her childhood and adolescence when Doležal always felt her difference, and was creative in allowing herself to accept it. Her abusive parents saw her as ‘the cursed child’ because she liked to run, dance, be physical and create things: her carnal nature, they felt, made her destined for hell (8). When, as a young child, she fell down stairs and broke vertebrae in her neck, her parents explained that it was ‘God’s way of punishing “stiff-necked people”’ (7), and refused to take her to a doctor. This childhood abuse would be a difficult read if it didn’t alternate in the narrative with parts of her life that were creative and industrious. It was her imagination and her ability to make things that allowed her to survive this period. When she wasn’t working the land, she made wreaths, froze blueberries, made dolls that she could sell for cash, and began working on projects that helped her develop into the professional artist she is today.⁵

Her early identification with blackness might also be related to a disavowal of the whiteness of her abusive parents and older brother. She seemed to associate her race with the negatives she saw in her strict, white, poor community. From the age of five, she was drawn to black culture (music, dance, art, literature), black aesthetics and racial struggles. In contrast to her parents, who believed that ‘the people of Ham’ were inferior, she found herself drawn to that community. She drew herself with a brown crayon and kinky hair, although she had white skin and lanky blond hair, and fantasized she was a princess from an African country. But the most significant event in her childhood was her parents’ adoption of four black children. Her parents treated her black siblings in a racialized manner, at times endangering the life of her brother Izaiah. She raised her adopted three brothers and one sister until she left for college. She said that it was this strong bond that made her feel ‘truly part of a family, surrounded by people who loved me exactly as I was’, and, because of them, she ‘didn’t feel so alone’ (59). As she grew older, she began to read about black history in order to become politically aware and help her black siblings manage in the world.

The second section concerns her life as a young adult, when she began to dress and groom herself in ways that identified her as black, and when she became politically active for black causes. In college in Mississippi, Doležal immediately sat at the one black table in the cafeteria and was

⁴ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* [1960] (San Antonio, TX: Wings Press 2011); James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* [1912] (Boston: Dover Publications 1995).

⁵ For works by Doležal, see ‘Rachel Doležal MFA’, available online at <http://racheldolezal.blogspot.co.uk> (viewed 20 October 2017).

accepted by that community. She traded her home made 'Little House on the Prairie' clothes for dashikis, and started wearing her hair in box braids. Almost everyone knew she was white but accepted her as an activist and an ally. Later, when she joined a black church, some assumed she was black and she noticed the change in tension when black people were not in mixed company. As she put it:

Being seen as Black also made social interactions in the community I lived in much easier. Black people related to me in a more relaxed way. Instead of putting up a wall and thinking of me as an outsider, they treated me as a member of the community, part of the family (90).

This echoes her earlier feeling of belonging with her black siblings, and seems to be the essence of her choice: the black community she found was the antithesis of what she experienced in her birth home. She didn't officially change her identification to black until the brother she adopted started a new school and didn't want to be perceived as twice adopted. Together, they decided to allow people to identify her as black and not mention her white origins. Tanning her skin facilitated this and her transformation now felt complete.

The final section of the book is on being outed and is the weakest. Her weary disappointment with the media's exploitation of her story makes the narrative lose its energy. The book is written in a straightforward way, without irony or defensiveness. Her unique childhood and perspective on identity are fascinating because we watch how, piece by piece, she finds her way without any guidance on how to do it. Her tone in the book is not one of contrition, which many would prefer, nor is it one of anger, which one might expect given her stripped-down life. As in the interviews she gave that preceded the book, Doležal is unapologetic and almost innocently puzzled by the response people have had to her.

Focus Groups

Despite Doležal's very personal and unique journey, many Americans will continue only to see her as a symbol. In order to see what that meant in greater depth, I conducted focus groups in the summer of 2017 using Doležal as the catalyst for a discussion of race and racial boundaries. I wondered if individual's views concerning Doležal were aligned with race. In my focus groups with black, white and mixed-race Americans, people seemed to be equally upset by her, but I found that each racial group saw her through the lens of their own racial trauma. For Blacks, it was their mistrust of Whites that came from a lifetime of being read as black, and their resentment that Whites are able to access the positive things about black culture without having been through the trials. For Whites, there was a fear of losing whiteness, but also of being labelled racist or being associated with white supremacy.

One 72-year-old black male participant spoke of the immutability of his own blackness compared to Doležal's. These sentiments were echoed by others.

She can't be black and I can't be white, period. No way, nothing she can do is going to make her black in the sense that I understand. Just like there's nothing that I can do that's going to make me white (Focus Group 2B).

Race was a burden these black participants had been fixed with permanently. Success, education, money, professionalism: nothing would ultimately change this positioning in the world. With it came injustice, violence, danger and missed opportunities. Unless you were light enough to pass, blackness was yours from birth to death. Doležal joining blackness midway down the road of her life (she started being read as black in her 20s) wasn't the same. As Rogers Brubaker says in his book *Trans*: 'Identifying *with* black people and black culture was one thing; identifying *as* black was another.'⁶ A 32-year-old black man spoke about legitimacy, emphasizing the privilege she had that black people can't share.

She came in through dishonest means and that destroyed her credibility. Still doesn't win my trust because I think there's something fundamentally wrong with her and I think she's engaging in this profound deception and dishonesty and exercising a privilege which no black person has (Focus Group 2B).

The other theme in the black focus groups was that Doležal had access to the positive benefits of being black: a community whose solidarity was based on shared suffering, but also pride in the history and the culture that resulted from it. She entered that community without the credentials. Not only was her entrance into the community unearned, they felt, but it was an extension of white people duping black people since they stole them into slavery. The series of promises made to black people that weren't kept is connected to the injustices today: the '40 acres and a mule' that never materialized after emancipation, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments that were not legally enforced, the brutal treatment by police that continues today, and illegitimate incarceration.

Another 32-year-old black man explained the anger black people felt as a result of a history of exploitation.

⁶ Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2016), 21.

Not that she's done anything new and unique but it's just the same old shit that white folks have been doing to black people for hundreds of years, right? Appropriating, taking on and then speaking for as opposed to with (Focus Group 2B).

Many black people historically have responded to these injustices by feeling more comfortable and trusting within the black community. When it comes to feeling at home with someone, as one man in Focus Group 2B put it, 'you get there quicker'. Doležal getting access to this subjugated group 'without permission' made her, many felt, an interloper, receiving the benefits of intimacy that weren't due to her. (And this sets off reminders of other times Whites have had access to black culture and gained financial reward.) This, to them, was just another instance of how white people have hoodwinked black people.

The white focus groups were just as disturbed by Doležal, but for different reasons. One 22-year-old female expressed her sense that race was immutable and God-given, and that Doležal was not properly in awe of what she had been given.

It's not right. God created you for a reason. God gave you your body, your facial structures, everything for a reason. I think, personally, she's just saying, 'F my genetics. F my family. F how God put me on this planet for.' I don't know. I just think it's really morally incorrect and insulting (Focus Group 1W).

The other larger response (particularly in participants in their 20s) was that Doležal's bold choice to be black went against the sensitivity training that characterizes college education today, including courses about diversity, race and social justice. White people in these groups have been taught to tread carefully around race and not speak for black people or make assumptions that they have access to black culture (even as they admire it). As a result of this awareness, many Whites have a deep-seated fear of being seen as racist. As Kenyatta Forbes, educator and creator of the Trading Races card game, puts it, 'being called a racist is the deepest wound for a white person in America. Then you get associated with the history of America. You do whatever is necessary not to be put in that box.'⁷ What makes many white people angry seems to be confusion. Their white guilt makes them wonder how to treat Doležal. Their attempts to be in sync with black culture through clothing, music, language or food has often resulted in having the whistle blown on them as cultural appropriators. One 20 year old woman expressed frustration at how self-conscious she had to be.

⁷ Author's telephone interview with Kenyatta Forbes, 24 July 2017.

We take over a lot of stuff and we have a lot of privilege. It's like, if you say something, then you're being too aggressive and complaining too much, whereas if you don't say anything . . . you're damned if you do, damned if you don't (Focus Group 1W).

If a white person, like Doležal, moves over to the black side just by deciding that that is who she is, but not by anyone sanctioning that choice or giving permission, she is doing what they have been trained to avoid. They must turn on her or *they* will be called racist.

White man, 26:

Yeah, I think it's pretty BS too, just because again, I feel like she's being stereotypical. What makes her feel African-American? The fact that she has an afro? That's racist.

2 White woman in their 20s:

Yeah, that's racist (Focus Group 1W).

These focus groups were surprising in their consistency along racial lines. Although everyone had an awareness of race as a social construct, it had little effect on processing the trauma of the past. In our present multiethnic, multiracial society, things have become ambiguous. The human genome project has dissolved the last stand of scientific belief in racial categories. The US Census reminds those filling out forms that the categories are based on 'self-identification', not biology. Immigration and intermarriage are changing the demographics so, for anyone born after today, Whites will no longer be the majority. Nonetheless, race is not something that will be easily dissolved even if the boundaries are starting to blur. The trauma that the United States has experienced because of the construction of race is still an open wound. Doležal is the ghost that haunts our assumptions about race, and tells us we aren't standing on firm ground anymore.

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